CIA Spy Speak Glossary

You might walk the walk, but can you talk the talk? Being a spy is more than just the gadgets and the disguises. To be successful in the field, you need to speak like a spy. So, before you head out on your next mission, or write the next great American spy novel, take some time to familiarize yourself with our Spy Speak glossary.

A

A-12 OXCART: a highly secret, now declassified aircraft developed by CIA and Lockheed during the early 1960s as the **U-2** spy plane's successor. Intended to meet the nation's need for a very fast, very high-flying reconnaissance aircraft that could avoid Soviet air defenses, the A-12 OXCART could fly Mach 3.2 at 90,000 feet altitude. The SR-71 Blackbird was the U.S. Air Force's two-seat follow-on version of the OXCART.

Agent: a person who spies on their own country; typically a citizen of a foreign country who is spying on behalf of the United States Government. Not to be confused with CIA employees, who are known as intelligence "**officers**." Often used interchangeably with "**asset**."

Alias: a false name used to hide one's real identity and purpose.

All-Source Intelligence: intelligence products, organizations, and/or activities that incorporate all sources of information collected, most frequently including human resources intelligence (**HUMINT**), imagery intelligence (**IMINT**), measurement and signature intelligence (**MASINT**), signals intelligence (**SIGINT**), Geospatial Intelligence (**GEOINT**), and open-source (**OSINT**) data.

Area 51: the popular name for the Nevada Test and Training Range at Groom Lake, a mysterious, isolated testing site in the Nevadan desert where the CIA's **U-2** spy plane, the **A-12 OXCART**, and many others were developed and tested. Area 51 is also known as Watertown, Dreamland, Paradise Ranch, and Groom Lake.

Asset: a **clandestine** source; an **agent**.

B

Blowback: unintended consequences, side-effects, or repercussions that result from an activity that has a negative effect on U.S. national security interests.

Blown: when an intelligence officer or **agent's** true identity or clandestine activity is unintentionally no longer disguised by their cover identity or story.

Bona Fides: proof, usually through documentary evidence, that something is real or genuine; proof of an intelligence officer or **asset's** claimed identity.

Bug: a **clandestine** listening device.

Burn Bag: a brown paper-bag used to dispose of **classified** material by, you guessed it, burning it.

C

Case Officer: a CIA officer responsible for **clandestinely** spotting, assessing, developing, recruiting, and handling non-U.S. citizens who have access to foreign intelligence vital to U.S. foreign policy and national security decision-makers.

Chief of Station: the officer in charge at a CIA **station**.

Cipher: a system for the **encryption** or decryption of a message using an algorithm; a cipher makes a word or phrase secret by changing or rearranging the individual letters in a message.

Clandestine: secret.

Classified: information that the U.S. government deems would be harmful to national security if it were released to the public and therefore requires a certain level of protection. Access to this information is restricted by law to people with the necessary security clearance and/or "**need-to-know**."

Code: a code changes the meaning of a word or phrase by replacing it with a different word, phrase, number, or other symbol to make a message secret.

Compartmentalization: limiting of access to information to people who have a "**need-to-know**."

Compromised: when an operation or **asset** is uncovered.

Concealment Device: an ordinary object with a hidden cavity used to hide things.

Confidential: a former classification designation that is no longer used by CIA.

Counterintelligence: information gathered and activities conducted to protect against the efforts of foreign intelligence agencies.

Cover: a false identity or explanation for actions to conceal one's true identity or intentions.

Covert: something that is hidden or secret, often an action by an intelligence agency that is concealed or disguised; not openly acknowledged or displayed.

Covert Action: activities that the CIA might undertake in other countries, under presidential authority, to accomplish a U.S. foreign policy objective without the hand of the U.S. government becoming known or apparent to the outside world.

Cryptology: the science of **encrypting** and decrypting secret messages.

D

Dangle: a person who is made accessible to a foreign intelligence agency with the intent of being recruited by that agency to then work as a **double agent** for the person's own country.

Dead Drop: a secret location where materials can be left, sometimes in a **concealment device**, for someone else to then retrieve; often used between an intelligence officer and their **asset** or **agent**.
Defector: an individual who has intelligence value who volunteers to work for a foreign intelligence service in exchange for asylum in that service's country.
Disinformation: false information spread deliberately.
Double Agent: an agent who initially works for one intelligence service, but who then volunteers for, or is recruited by, a second foreign intelligence agency, most often for the purpose of feeding the original agency **disinformation** or spying on them.

E
Encryption: the use of **codes** and **ciphers** to create secret messages.
Espionage: the use of **clandestine** efforts to acquire **classified** information; the unauthorized transmittal of classified information to a foreign nation or entities with the intent to harm the U.S. or aid a foreign power.
Eyes-Only: a designation signifying who may read a specific, **classified** document.
Exfiltration: a **clandestine** operation to bring a **defector**, or **asset,** out of their country to avoid harm or capture.

F
False Flag: a deliberate misrepresentation of motives or identity; an operation designed to appear as if it were conducted by someone other than the person or group responsible for it.
Five Eyes: an alliance between the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom for intelligence sharing.
Flaps and Seals: The tradecraft of **clandestinely** opening, reading, and resealing envelopes or packages without the recipient's knowledge.

G
GEOINT/Geospatial Intelligence: the analysis and visual representation of security related activities on the earth. It is produced through an integration of imagery, **imagery intelligence**, and geospatial information.

H
Handler: the case officer who manages an **agent**.
Honey Trap: spy slang for using men or women to seduce and entrapment others for the purpose of intelligence gathering; a tactic often practiced by the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

HUMINT: intelligence collected from human sources. It is the oldest method for collecting information, and until the technical revolution of the mid- to late 20th century, it was the primary source of intelligence.

I

IMINT/Imagery Intelligence: intelligence collected from imagery. This includes visual photography, radar sensors, and electro-optics.

Infiltration: the action of moving an intelligence officer or asset, or other operative, into a target area secretively to acquire secret information or conduct a **clandestine** operation.

Intelligence: valuable, secret information; information gathered within or outside the U.S. that involves threats to our nation, its people, property, or interests; development, proliferation, or use of weapons of mass destruction; and any other matter bearing on the U.S. national or homeland security. Intelligence can also refer to the analytical products, such as the President's Daily Brief, that are created from raw intelligence gathered and analyzed by intelligence officers.

Intelligence Community: a group of 18 U.S. executive branch agencies and organizations that work both separately and together to conduct activities necessary to collect secret information or covert actions to inform policymakers and protect the national security interests of the United States.

Intelligence Cycle: a five-step process of collecting information and developing it into **intelligence** for use by intelligence community customers and policymakers. The steps in the process are requirements, collection, processing, exploitation, and dissemination.

J

Jedburghs: elite **Office of Strategic Services** and British Special Operations Executive paratroopers sent into Nazi-occupied France, Belgium, and the Netherlands during World War II to coordinate airdrops of arms and supplies, guide local partisans on hit-and-run attacks and sabotage, and assist the advancing Allied armies to defeat the Third Reich.

K

KGB: the Soviet Union's intelligence and state-security service during the Cold War.

Kompromat: a term originally used to describe compromising material gathered by Russian or Soviet officials. Also used generally to describe compromising material gathered for blackmail or to discredit and manipulate someone for political gain or leverage.

L

Leak: the intentional, unauthorized disclosure of **classified** or sensitive information to a person or an organization that does not have a "**need-to-know**."

M

MASINT/Measurement and Signature Intelligence: an intelligence discipline built on capturing and measuring the intrinsic characteristics and components of an object or activity. These characteristics allow the object or activity to be detected and/or identified when it's encountered in the future.

MI5: the British domestic counterintelligence service responsible for national internal security; known as the Security Service.

MI6: the British foreign intelligence service; known as the Secret Intelligence Service.

Microdot: a picture or even a whole page of text shrunken down to the size of a period. That way, only someone who knows where to find it can enlarge it and read the secret message or image.

Mole: an **agent** of one organization or intelligence agency that penetrates another organization or intelligence agency for purposes of gaining privileged or classified information.

N

Need-to-Know: a measure of access to **classified** intelligence. Does this person need the information to perform their job functions?

O

Officer: an employee of the CIA; often confused with "**agent**," which is the foreign person recruited by a CIA officer to spy on their home country.

One-Time Pad: a virtually unbreakable crypto algorithm where text is combined with a random key and is used only once to encrypt a message. What makes it unbreakable is that only the sender and receiver have the pad (key) needed to encrypt and decrypt the message, so someone would have to get a hold of the pad in order to read that specific message as the same key will never be used again.

OSINT/Open Source Intelligence: publicly available information appearing in print or electronic form including radio, television, newspapers, journals, the Internet, social media, commercial databases, and videos, graphics, and drawings.

Office of Strategic Services (OSS): created during WWII, OSS was America's first all-purpose intelligence agency and the precursor to today's CIA and U.S. Special Forces. It was led by the legendary WWI hero, General William "Wild Bill" Donovan.

Overt: something done openly; not concealed or secret.

P

Polygraph: a device used to measure the different physiological responses (heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, and skin conductivity) that people have when answering questions.

Propaganda: communications to the public that are designed to influence opinion and further an agenda.

Pseudonym: a fictitious name used internally by CIA officers to conceal their true identity.

Q

Q: a fictional character in James Bond who is a technology genius responsible for inventing spy gadgets.

R

Rolled-up: when an undercover operation goes bad and is raided by opposing forces, resulting in **agents** or **assets** being arrested.

S

Sabotage: to deliberately destroy, damage, or obstruct, especially for political or military advantage. Although sabotage is often conducted for political or military reasons, other motivations can include personal disgruntlement.

Safehouse: a house, apartment, or other nondescript structure used to covertly house **assets** or to conduct **clandestine** meetings.

Sanitize: the deletion or revision of classified materials in a document or report to prevent the identification of intelligence sources and collection methods.

Secret: a classification designation applying to information, the unauthorized disclosure of which reasonably could be expected to cause serious damage to U.S. national security.

Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility (SCIF): a specially-constructed secure area, room, group of rooms, or installations where **classified** information may be stored, used, discussed and/or electronically processed.

SIGINT/Signals Intelligence: the collection and exploitation of signals transmitted from communication systems, radars, and weapon systems.

Sleeper: an **agent** or spy living as an ordinary citizen in a foreign country and acts only if or when directed by their home agency.

Spill: unintentional transfer of **classified** or sensitive information to unaccredited or unauthorized systems, individuals, applications, or media.

Spy: someone who provides classified information about his country to another country; an **agent** or **asset**.

Station: a building or office in which CIA employees work.
Surveillance: the systematic visual observation, by any means, of a specific individual or individuals without their knowledge.

T

Target: a person or organization that has access to information critical to U.S. foreign intelligence requirements.
Top Secret: a classification designation applying to information, the unauthorized disclosure of which reasonably could be expected to cause exceptionally grave damage to U.S. national security.
Tradecraft: the techniques, methods, and technologies used in intelligence work; basically the learned skillset of intelligence officers. Also can refer to the methodologies and techniques used by **assets** in the field, i.e. "practicing good tradecraft."
Triple Agent: an **agent** who works for three intelligence services but who is typically only loyal to one. Or, a spy who pretends to be a double agent for one service, but who is actually a double agent for the other service.

U

U-2: one of the most famous spy planes ever built, the U-2 photo reconnaissance aircraft could fly at 70,000 feet, had a range of 3,500 nautical miles, and could stay in the air for 8 1/2 hours.

V

Vet: to establish the **bona fides** of a reporting source.

W

Walk-in: a potential **asset** who offers information to a foreign intelligence service by walking into that service's official installation.

X

X-2: the **Office of Strategic Services'** counterintelligence branch during WWII.

Y

Year of the Spy: 1985; an inordinately high number of foreign spies were caught operating in America.

Z

Dr. Zhivago: a love story set against the backdrop of the Russian Revolution, written by renowned Russian author Boris Pasternak, **covertly** published by the CIA.
https://www.cia.gov/resources/spy-glossary/